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AN EARLY CHINESE SWAN-MAIDEN STORY

By Arthur Waley

As this story does not seem to be known to Western folklorists, I have thought it worth while to translate it in full. I leave it to specialists to compare this version with those already known to them. I would only say first that I do not believe the second half of the story, in which the Swan-maiden's son answers conundrums, has any intrinsic connection with the main story. Chinese popular literature teems with scenes in which sages (Confucius, Yen Tzu, the infant-prodigy Hsiang T'o, and many more) distinguish themselves by answering difficult questions, and it is evident that readers and listeners delighted in and demanded such passages. There are of course versions¹ of the Swan-maiden story in which her husband is put through his paces by being made to answer a series of questions or riddles; but I do not think that the second part of our story is connected with episodes of that kind.

The manuscript of the story is preserved at the Museum of Calligraphy (formerly the Nakamura Fusetsu collection) at Tokyo. It comes from the hidden library at the caves near Tun-huang, discovered in 1899 or 1900. It was first published, in a very inaccurate form, in 1924. I have used the much better text published in the *Tun-huang Pien-wen Chi* (1957), pp. 882-885. The date of the story is probably about the ninth century A.D.

* * *

Once upon a time there was a man called T'ien K'un-lun. He was very poor, and was not able to marry a wife. In the land he owned there was a pond which was deep, clear and beautiful. Once when the crops were ripe he went to his field and saw that there were three beautiful girls washing themselves and bathing in the pond. Wanting to have a look at them he watched them from a hundred paces away. They at once changed into three white cranes, two of which flew to a tree that stood by the pond and perched on top of it. But the third stayed in the pond, washing herself.

T'ien K'un-lun pressed low down between the corn-stalks and crept forward to look at her. These beautiful girls were heavenly maidens (*t'ien-nü*). The two older ones clasped their heavenly robes and rode off into the sky. But the youngest, who was in the pond, did not dare come out. She made no secret of this, saying to K'un-lun: "We three sisters, who are heavenly maidens, came out to amuse ourselves for a while in this pond. But you, the owner of the pond, saw us. My two elder sisters were able to rescue their heavenly robes in time and escape. But I, the youngest, lingered all alone in the pond and you, the owner of the pond, took away my heavenly robe and I cannot come naked out of the pond. Please do me the kindness to give it back to me, that I may cover my nakedness and come out of the pond. If you do so, I will marry you." But K'un-lun debated the matter in his mind and decided that if he gave her the heavenly robe, there was a danger she might fly away. So he answered: "Madam, it is no use your asking for your heavenly robe, for you will never get it. But how would it be if I were to take

¹ Cf. O. Mänchen-Helfen, *T'oung Pao*, 1936, p. 10.

off my shirt, so that for the time being you could cover yourself with that?"

At first the heavenly maiden refused to come out on these terms, and K'un-lun at last declared that it was getting dark and he must go. She tried to detain him, still asking for her robe; but when she found she could not get it, her tone changed and she said to K'un-lun: "Very well then! Give me your shirt to cover me while I come out of the pond, and I will marry you." K'un-lun was delighted. He rolled up the heavenly robe and hid it away. Then he took off his shirt and gave it to the heavenly maiden, to cover her when she came out of the pond. She said to K'un-lun: "Do not be afraid I shall go away. Let me put on my heavenly robe again, and I will go along with you." But K'un-lun would rather have died than give it to her, and without more ado he took her home with him to show her to his mother. The mother was delighted and ordered mats to be set out. All the friends and relatives of the family were invited and on the appointed day the girl was hailed as New Bride. Although she was a heavenly maiden, they had intercourse after the manner of people in this world, and lived together. Days went and months came, and presently she bore him a son, a fine child, whom they named T'ien Chang.

Soon afterwards K'un-lun was marked down for service in the west, and was away a long time. The heavenly maiden said to herself: "Since my husband went away I have been bringing up this child for three years." Then she said to her mother-in-law: "I am a heavenly maiden. At the time I came, when I was small and young, my father made for me a heavenly robe,² and with it I rode through the sky and came here. If I were to see that robe now, I wonder what size it would be. Let me have a look at it; I would dearly love to see it!"

Now on the day that K'un-lun went away he had given strict orders to his mother, saying: "This is the heavenly maiden's robe. Keep it hidden away and do not let her see it. For if she sees it, she will certainly ride away with it through the sky, and will never be seen again." Whereupon the mother had said to K'un-lun: "Where would be the safest place to hide it?" So K'un-lun made a plan with his mother, deciding that nowhere would it be more secure than in the mother's bedroom. The thing to do was to make a hole under one of the bed-legs, stuff the robe into it and herself always lie on top. Then the Heavenly Maiden would certainly not get at it. So they hid it away like this, and K'un-lun went off to the west.

After he went away, she thought constantly about the heavenly robe, fretting about it all the time and never knowing a moment's happiness. She said to her mother-in-law: "Do let me just have a look at the heavenly robe!" She kept on worrying her about this, and at last she decided to fall in with her wish. So she told her daughter-in-law to go outside the gate, walk quietly to and fro for a little while and then come in again. She went out at once and the mother-in-law took out the heavenly robe from under the bed-leg and, when the heavenly maiden came back, showed it to her. When she saw it, her heart was cut to the quick, her tears fell like floods of rain, and she longed

² Compare the *Hymn to the Soul* (Apocryphal Acts of Thomas): "My parents . . . took off the glittering robe that in their love they had made for me."

to ride off through the air. But having thought out no plan to do this, she had to give it back to her mother-in-law, who again hid it away.

Less than ten days later she said once more to her mother-in-law: "Let me have another look at my heavenly robe." The mother-in-law said: "I was afraid you might put it on and fly away from us." The daughter-in-law said: "I was once a heavenly maiden. But now I am married to your son and we have had a child. How can you think I would leave you? Such a thing is impossible." The mother-in-law gave in, but was still afraid that she might fly away, and set someone to keep strict watch at the main gate.

But the heavenly maiden, as soon as she had put on the robe, flew straight up into the sky through the roof-vent. The old woman beat her breast (?) and in great distress hurried out to the door to see what happened to her. She arrived in time to see her soaring away into the sky. The mother-in-law, when she knew that she had lost her daughter-in-law, let out such a cry as pierced the bright sky, her tears fell like rain, she became utterly desperate and in the bitter sorrow of her heart all day she would not eat.

The heavenly maiden had passed more than five years in the world of men, and now she had spent her first two days in heaven above. When she escaped and reached her home both her sisters cursed her for a shameless baggage. "By marrying that common creature of the world of men," they said, "you have made your father and mother so sad that they do nothing but weep. However," the two elder sisters said to the younger sister, "it is no good your continually lamenting as you are doing now. Tomorrow we three sisters will go together and play at the pool. Then you will certainly see your child."

The child T'ien Chang had just reached his fifth year. At home he was constantly sobbing and calling out for his mother, and out in the fields he continually wailed in sadness. At that time there was a certain Master Tung Chung who was always seeking for persons of superior conduct. He knew that this was the child of a heavenly maiden and knew that the heavenly maiden was about to come down to the lower world. So he said to the child: "Just at midday go to the side of the pond and look. Three women will come all dressed in white silk robes. Two of them will raise their heads and look at you; but one will lower her head and pretend not to see you, and that one will be your mother."

T'ien Chang did as Tung Chung told him, and just at midday he saw beside the pond three heavenly maidens, all dressed in white silk robes, cutting salad-herbs at the edge of the pond. T'ien Chang went nearer and looked at them. Seeing him from afar they knew that it was the child who had come, and the two elder sisters said to the younger: "Your child has come." Then he wailed and called out to his mother. But she, although she hung her head in shame and did not look at him, could not stop her sorrow from coming out of her heart, and she wept bitterly. Then the three sisters took their heavenly robes and carried the child away with them into the sky. When God (literally, "the heavenly elder," *t'ien-kung*) saw them, he knew it was his daughter's son and he felt very tenderly towards him, and taught him magic arts and accomplishments. When he had been up in heaven for four or five days, he [no longer] looked like a child of the world below. When he had

studied for more than fifteen years, God said to him: "Take these eight volumes of my writings and they will make you glorious, rich and honoured all your life. But if you go to Court, you must be careful not to tell anyone about them." The young man then went down into the world below. Everything that there was to hear he got to know of, and he understood the whole universe. The Emperor heard about him and summoned him to be Chief Minister. But he committed an offence in the back palace,³ and was banished to a place in the western wilds.

Afterwards, when all the officials were out hunting in the fields, they shot a crane, and gave it to the kitchen-man to cook. When he slit its throat, he found in it a child three inches and two part-inches tall, wearing cuirass and helmet, and pouring out a flood of abuse. The kitchen-man reported the matter to the Emperor, who at once summoned all his ministers, officials and counsellors, and asked them about it. But they all said they did not know.

On another occasion one of the princes, when out hunting, found a front-tooth three inches and two part-inches long. He brought it home and pounded it; but it did not break. All the officials were again asked; but they all said they did not know. The Emperor then issued a proclamation which was distributed everywhere under heaven, saying that anyone who could explain these two things would be given a thousand catties of gold, a fief of ten thousand households and any rank he liked to name. But no one came forward. Then all the ministers and officials consulted together and agreed that only T'ien Chang⁴ could recognize these things; no one else could explain them. The Emperor then sent an envoy galloping full tilt on relay-horses to bring back T'ien Chang. When he arrived, the Emperor said: "I have always heard that you are a man of great intelligence and wide knowledge, and that in fact you know everything. Here is a question. Have there been any giants anywhere under heaven?"

T'ien Chang answered: "There have." "What giant has there been?" asked the Emperor. "Once upon a time," said T'ien Chang, "there was Ku Yen of Ch'in, who was the son of the Emperor. During a battle with the people of Lu, one of his front teeth was knocked out, and no one knows what became of it. If someone finds it, the truth of what I say can be tested." The Emperor then knew that it was this that had passed into his possession.

He then questioned him a second time: "Have there been any pygmies under heaven?" he asked. "There have," said T'ien Chang. "What one has there been?" asked the Emperor. "Once upon a time," said T'ien Chang, "there was Li Tzu-ao. He was three inches and two part-inches tall and wore a cuirass and helmet. Once when he was out in the fields he was swallowed by a crane⁵ and is still playing about in its throat. If a huntsman

³ i.e. had an intrigue with a court lady.

⁴ There was an obscure historical personage (c. 313 B.C.) called T'ien Chang who probably has no connection with this story. T'ien Chang the answerer of riddles figures in a fragmentary text discovered by Stein near Tun-huang, dating from about the first century A.D. "T'ien Chang replied: 'I have heard that the height of Heaven is 19,000 li,

and that the width of the earth is equal to the height of Heaven.'" (Maspero, *Documents Chinois*, No. 27.)

⁵ This is reminiscent of the story of the pygmies and the cranes, which is first found in *Iliad*, III, 3. The question of classical influences in Chinese folk-tales has been treated by B. Laufer, "Ethnographische Sagen der Chinesen," in *Aufsätze . . . E. Kuhn . . .*

gets that crane and brings Li to you for verification, you will know who he is." "Excellent," said the Emperor. And he asked another question. "Is there anywhere under heaven a really big noise?" "There is," said T'ien Chang. "And what is it?" "Thunder shakes things seven hundred leagues away, and its rumbling can be heard one hundred and seventy leagues away. Those are both big noises." "And is there any very small sound under heaven?" T'ien answered: "There is." "Which is it?" "Three men walking shoulder to shoulder. One man whispers something and the other two hear nothing. That is surely a small sound." The Emperor asked again: "Is there anywhere under heaven a large bird?" T'ien Chang answered: "There is." "What is it?" "The great Rukh which in one flight can reach Hsi Wang Mu.⁶ It can wing its way nineteen thousand leagues before it needs a meal. This is surely a large bird!" The Emperor asked again: "Is there a small bird under heaven?" He said: "There is." "Which is it?" "There is no smaller bird than the *chiao-liao*. It brings up a family of seven children on the antennae of a fly and still finds its territory far too thinly populated. Meanwhile the fly does not know that there are birds on its head. Surely this is a small bird?"

The Emperor then made T'ien Chang High Chamberlain, and because of what had happened both the Emperor and everyone under heaven knew that T'ien Chang was the son of a heavenly maiden.

* * *

It may be worth mentioning here that a quasi-Swan-maiden story is told in the *Hsüan-chung Chi* (c. A.D. 300 ?), in order to explain why the goat-sucker bird carries off children: "Once upon a time a man of Yü-chang (capital of Kiangsi) saw seven girls in the fields. He did not know that they were really birds. He crept towards them, meaning to take their feather robes and hide them. When he advanced upon the birds they rushed to their robes, put them on and flew away—all except one bird, who was too late. The man took her as his wife and had three girls by her. Afterwards the mother made the girls question their father. She learnt that her robe was under a pile of rice-stalks. She took it, put it on and flew away. Afterwards she came with feather robes to fetch her three daughters. When the three little girls got the robes they too flew away."

gewidmet, Munich, 1916, pp. 198 ff., esp. p. 200 f.

What is perhaps the earliest Chinese version of the pygmy-crane (in this case, swan) story is contained in the *Shen I Ching*, a work of perhaps c. A.D. 300: "Beyond the western ocean there is a country called Swan Land. The men and women are seven inches high. They have natural good manners, and are fond of learning, bowing and kneeling. They all live for three hundred years. They walk

as though flying and can go a thousand leagues a day. No creature dares molest them. Their one fear is of the lake-swan which, if it meets them, instantly swallows them. But all the same they live for three hundred years, because they do not die through being in the swan's belly. However, the swan carries them far away, a thousand leagues at a stretch."

⁶ The Queen of the Fairies.